



TALK THE TALK

Help Coaches Understand What You're Saying

By Brad Tittrington

For umpires, one of the most important skills is game management. And perhaps the most important skill when it comes to being a good game manager is being a good communicator. It is imperative umpires are able to effectively communicate with game administration, players and coaches alike.

The most important of those three are coaches. Umpires need to know

how to communicate, both verbally and non-verbally, with coaches in order to keep things moving smoothly. Below are some tips to help communicate with coaches and help keep you out of trouble during your games.

Listen First, Speak Second

In order to be good communicators, umpires must first be good listeners. Too often, umpires want to explain calls and get both the first and last word in edgewise. If

you choose to speak first, you may be trying to answer something a coach isn't even questioning. Coaches come out of the dugout or coach's box for a variety of reasons. It is important to find out why the coach is there in the first place before speaking. It may just be a coach wants to vent or give the appearance of fighting for the team and protecting players. There may not even be a question. Sometimes, a coach just wants someone to listen. If an umpire starts talking and explaining, that coach may feel

DALE GARVEY



Randy Navarro, Bothell, Wash., listens to a coach questioning a call. It is important for umpires to let coaches speak first to find out what information they are seeking or what questions they want answered.

like the umpire isn't approachable or genuinely isn't interested in that coach's point of view. Take a second, let the coach speak first and then answer only the questions asked.

Show Empathy

Coaches genuinely want to know umpires care. If an umpire doesn't care, it will show in both body language and the words an umpire chooses when speaking. At most levels, coaches are fighting for their

jobs and their jobs are based on wins and losses. They want to know the person adjudicating their games is willing to give them a fair shake and understand where they are coming from when they come out to ask questions. Use body language to show you understand what the coach is saying.

Silence Can't Be Misquoted

Umpires tend to get themselves in trouble when they talk too much. Whether it is talking to one coach too much when first entering the field, carrying on an excessively long lineup exchange at the pregame conference at home plate, or excessive communication during the game, nothing good can come from doing any of those. Keep conversations short and sweet and keep them to a minimum. Do not go actively looking for conversations with coaches or players. Anything you say can and will be used against you. The less you say, the better. That doesn't mean not to answer questions or be polite when players or coaches introduce themselves or try to start a conversation. It means simply respond and then don't continue carrying on the conversation for long periods of time. Someone is always watching and will want to know why you are being overly communicative with an opposing player or coach.

Stick to Rulebook Language

Using the verbiage in the rulebook is paramount. If you say something that isn't in the rulebook and stray off script, you potentially open yourself up for an extended conversation, or worse, a protest. Use the time it takes for a coach to get out to you to rehearse what you are going to say. It is natural to get nervous when someone questions a call. If you have a couple moments to take a deep breath, collect your thoughts and rehearse what you are going to say; it makes it much easier. This doesn't mean a coach is going to agree with your judgment, but if you are able to explain the rules as they are written and explain why you made the call, it can save a lot of headaches. If you stumble over your

QUICKTIP

One of the few times umpires can use subjectivity to award bases is on obstruction. The rule allows umpires to place a runner where the umpires judge the runner would have gotten absent the obstruction. **When in doubt, award the offense and penalize the defense.** Remember, the defense violated the rules and put the offense at a disadvantage.



DID YOU KNOW?

Jeff Hansen, Omaha, Neb., was the lone inductee into the National Softball Hall of Fame in 2022 in the umpire category. Hansen was selected to work the Olympic Games in 1996 in Atlanta and served as the Nebraska state UIC from 1986-98. He was hired as the national coordinator for softball umpires for the NCAA in 2000 when the Softball Umpire Improvement Program was created and held that post until the end of the 2005 season. He also spent time as the coordinator of umpires for the Big 12 Conference. Hansen becomes the 53rd person to be inducted into the Hall of Fame in the umpire category.



SIDELINE



WPF to Kick Off in June

Women's Professional Fastpitch (WPF) announced the launch of a new professional softball league, slated to begin in June. WPF aims to provide a long-lasting option for softball players after collegiate play. Lauren Chamberlain, a former professional softball player, was named commissioner of the league. A partnership between USA Softball, USSSA and Smash It Sports is behind the WPF founding. Headquartered in Oklahoma City, teams will play nationwide.

TEST YOURSELF

Each of the following includes a situation and possible answer(s). Decide which are correct for USA, NFHS, NCAA or USSSA rules and which might vary. **Solutions:** p. 81.

1. How many warmup pitches maximum is a pitcher allowed between innings?
 - a. Three pitches.
 - b. Five pitches.
 - c. Unlimited but must be completed within 60 seconds.
 - d. Unlimited but must be completed within 90 seconds.

2. With one out, R1 on first and an 0-1 count on the batter, B3 hits a ground ball to the right side. F4 fields the ball, tags R1 and then throws the ball to F3 at first base ahead of B3's arrival. At the moment B3 contacted the ball, her entire left foot was touching the ground outside the batter's box.
 - a. The ball is dead immediately upon contact, B3 is ruled out and R1 must return to first base.
 - b. No infraction has occurred. R1 is ruled out on the force out at second base and B3 is ruled out on the force out at first base.
 - c. Delayed dead ball. The defensive team coach shall choose the result of the play or the standard effect for illegal contact, which is a strike on the batter and all baserunners must return to the base legally occupied at the time of pitch.

3. With R1 on first and R2 on second, B3 hits a ball to the fence in left field. Both R1 and R2 come around to score. R2 misses third base when coming around to score and after R1 crosses the plate, R2 returns to third to touch it and then comes home again and crosses home plate.
 - a. Legal play, the defense may not appeal the missed touching of third base by R2.
 - b. Once R1 scored, R2 lost the opportunity to return to touch a missed base and the defense may legally appeal the missed touching of third base by R2.

4. B1 hits a ground ball up the first-base line that rolls foul. B1 and F3, who was charging in, collide. B1 and F3 begin pushing and shoving each other and attempt to fight each other. The assistant coach in the first-base dugout leaves the dugout and comes onto the field to restrain F3 to prevent further fighting.
 - a. Legal action as any coach may leave the dugout to restrain combatants during a fight.
 - b. Only the head coach may leave the dugout during a fight to restrain combatants, so the assistant coach should be ejected.

AFTER A COACH COMES OUT AND QUESTIONS A CALL, YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO FORGET IT AND MOVE ON. REMEMBER, COACHES ARE NOT TAKING IT OUT ON YOU PERSONALLY.

words or you don't explain the rule correctly, coaches will not trust you or believe you have confidence in your call.

De-escalate the Situation

Not all situations are created equal and not all coaches work the same way. Some coaches simply want an explanation and move on. Others may be more animated and want to be confrontational. As umpires, our first job is to de-escalate the situation. There are a few ways to help this. One is to make sure you are not face to face with coaches. Try to stay to the side so it doesn't appear that you are being confrontational. When the coach is speaking, listen. Do not try to talk over the coach, unless of course they are being unsportsmanlike and you need to get them to refrain to avoid being ejected. Otherwise, try to listen to what the coach is saying. By nodding your head or saying, "I understand," it will show the coach you are listening and trying to see where the coach is coming from. Then once the coach is done asking the questions, in a calm voice, answer why you made the call you made. If you try to talk at the same time, there is no active listening taking place and you will further complicate the issue.

Carefully Word Warnings

When coaches cross the line, we need to use the tools in our belt to deal with them. One of the ways we can do that is through warnings. However, be careful what you say when giving a warning. We can back ourselves into a corner if we say certain phrases. Avoid phrases like, "Don't say another word." What happens if the coach says, "Word"?

You have now backed yourself into a corner and you either have to eject the coach or worse, if you don't, the coach knows the warning was an empty threat. Instead, simply say, "Coach, this is your warning for arguing balls and strikes," or whatever the warning may be for. Then if the coach continues to argue, you eject him or her.

Don't Take It Personally

After a coach comes out and questions a call, you have to be able to forget it and move on. Remember, coaches are not taking it out on you personally. They are taking it out on the uniform — unless of course they start the sentence with the word "you." Then it is personal and see the tip above this one about giving a warning. Otherwise, learn to quickly flush it and move on to the next play at hand. Once that conversation is over, coaches and umpires both need to let it go. You can remember it as a postgame conversation with partners, but don't allow it to become a sticking point for the rest of the game.

Communication with coaches happens multiple times a game and the best umpires are able to manage those interactions calmly and professionally. While it is important to focus on mechanics and rules throughout the season, it is just as important to work on your interpersonal skills. Take time to become an effective communicator and it will dramatically increase your effectiveness on the field and will help elevate your career.

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